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# Who Teaches Technical and Professional Communication Service Courses?: Survey Results and Case Studies from a National Study of Instructors from All Carnegie Institutional Types

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**Abstract.** In this article, we offer answers to the question, “Who teaches the technical and professional communication service course and in what institutional situations?” We present data from a national online survey of technical and professional communication instructors from across all Carnegie institutional types (2- and 4-year). In addition, we share four case-studies of survey respondents whose situations present the greatest challenges facing those who seek to improve or reform the technical and professional communication service course. We close the article by putting the case studies into the context of the reported survey data and arguing for how advocates for the technical and professional communication course might use the data to initiate a national discussion that accommodates all stakeholders.

**Keywords:** instructor data, instructor profiles, labor conditions, service course

**W**ho teaches the technical and professional communication service course and in what institutional situations? In this article, we offer answers to this question based on data we collected from a national online survey and a number of follow-up interviews with technical and professional communication instructors. Our survey was designed to address our primary research question: “What is the status of the multi-major, professional writing course (i.e., TPC service course) in US higher education?” We understood the construct of “status” as inclusive of a number of factors related to

students, faculty, and institutional situation. In this article, we report on only the data from the full survey that is relevant to the question we have posed above—about who teaches the course and in what institutional situations.

For the purposes of our research, we set the scope for what counts as the technical and professional communication service course as broadly as possible. We asked respondents to self-identify their courses as technical and professional communication service courses, with the expected result that course titles would vary widely, including terms such as business, workplace, technical, professional (and often more than one of these terms). The broadness of our scope with regard to what counts as a technical and professional communication service course reflects the difficulty previous researchers have encountered when trying to categorize or define curricula or programs in business, professional, and technical writing (e.g., Sullivan & Porter, 1993; Yeats & Thompson, 2010). In order to avoid rediscovering the same problems of categorization posed by the diversity of technical and professional communication curriculum, programs, and institutional situation, we chose to bring the many instantiations of the course under one larger umbrella so that we could focus on trends across Carnegie institution classifications.

Prior research has demonstrated that across all types of higher education institutions, the majority of technical and professional communication service courses are taught by non-tenure track faculty, including adjunct, part-time, full-time non-tenure track, and graduate-student faculty. Data gathered by Lisa Meloncon & Peter England (2011, p. 405) show that as many as 83% of technical and professional communication service course sections are taught by contingent faculty (data do not include two-year institutions). But what else do we know about the instructors who teach this course? The answer is very little, because, as we have argued elsewhere (Read & Michaud, 2018), the technical and professional communication service course is understudied as a unit of analysis in its own right. The course has not been studied laterally across the diverse institutional contexts in which it is taught. We do not know, for example, the levels of instructor-training across institutional ranks and types or the areas of instructors' scholarly

interest. Most importantly, we have little documented sense of the institutional conditions under which technical and professional communication instructors teach the course. These are questions that our research intended to investigate.

Our purpose in undertaking a broad examination of the technical and professional communication service course was to document what we sense, based on anecdotal and personal experience, are widely held observations and hunches about the status of the course. The utility, however, of documenting what experienced professionals already know, talk about, or experience in relation to the technical and professional communication service course is to make available data that can be used to move the realm of evidence about the course beyond the anecdotal and to advocate for systematic discussion about and reflection on the service course.

In the first half of this article, we share findings about technical and professional communication instructors, including their level(s) of training, area(s) of scholarly interest, and years of teaching experience. Additionally, we report on the institutional situation within which instructors work, including institution classification, number of sections taught per year, curricular standardization, and status of instructors who teach the greatest number of sections of technical and professional communication courses at their institution. In the second half of the article, we share four case studies gleaned from follow-up interviews that provide a more fully contextualized look at the experiences and institutional situations of four respondents. We argue that, in order to remain relevant to the broadest possible group of stakeholders, discussion of the status of the technical and professional communication service course must account for both strong trends in the survey data and the localized experiences of individual instructors.

### **Methods**

We built our survey<sup>1</sup> in Qualtrics and disseminated it during summer 2015 via professional listservs and social media sites related to writing studies and professional and technical writing (e.g. ATTW-L, WPA-L, NCTE Two-Year College Section email list, etc.). Overall, 220 respondents

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1 The survey was conducted with the approval of the Internal Review Boards of DePaul University and Rhode Island College. This research was supported by a Research Initiative Grant from the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC).

consented to take the survey, and 154 completed it in its entirety. Per our study design, the distribution of respondents across all 2- and 4-year Carnegie-classification types was proportional to the percentage of students enrolled nationally at each institution (see Appendix A). This proportional representation and especially the relatively balanced representation of respondents from associates and doctoral-granting institutions (38% and 37%, respectively), gave us confidence that our results account for the diversity of institutional contexts in which the technical and professional communication service course is taught. Additionally, our respondents, only 38% of whom were on the tenure-track, represent the diversity of institutional statuses that characterize those who teach the service course (see Appendix B).

After we closed the survey, we conducted ten follow-up interviews via Skype with respondents who opted-in to a follow-up interview. These interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. We chose interviewees to ensure representation of experience across all institutional types, which was one of the major variables in the survey. We asked these individuals to develop and expand upon their survey answers to provide us with additional context for our data. In choosing the four cases that we report on below, we have intentionally given voice to experiences that illustrate a range of challenges that technical and professional communication service course instructors face. Some of these will likely be unfamiliar to those who teach at medium or large, 4-year colleges and universities serving largely traditional student populations. Other challenges are common across all 2- and 4-year institution types, although they are not experienced to an equal degree across all faculty ranks.

### **Part I: Survey Data About Who Teaches the Course and Their Institutional Situations**

In this part of the article we report on data from the survey that develops the question “Who teaches the technical and professional communication service course?” In addition, we include tables of data about the institutional situation that instructors navigate to teach the course. It is important to read the trends in our data as reflective of only our respondent pool and not as a representative sample of the course nationally (we have done what we can using quotas to reasonably accommodate variation in institutional type and instructor status within our respondent pool). This study was not a population study

because no documented population (i.e., in a census) of technical and professional communication instructors exists, and therefore it cannot be studied using inferential statistical methods. The idea of this section is to get a broad view of the survey data and to provide context for the four case studies in Part II.

Survey Data on Who Teaches the Course

**Highest degree obtained.** Table 1 reports on the background and training of the technical and professional communication instructors who took our survey. Not surprisingly, instructors come from a range of different backgrounds and bring many different kinds of academic training to their teaching. A positive finding is that just over half of our respondents have achieved the degree of the PhD. Only half of those respondents, however, are on the tenure track, although a large majority have full-time positions. When it comes to respondents with an MA/MFA/MS/M.ED, more than half of the respondents are in tenure-track or full-time positions. This is good news and likely reflects the large number of respondents at 2-year colleges.

Table 1. Highest degree obtained

	MA	MFA	MBA	MS	PHD	M.ED/MAT	Other	Total
Graduate Instructor/Teaching Assistant	7	0	0	0	0	1	3	11
Tenure-Track	8	2	0	0	46	0	3	59
Full-time non-tenure track	17	0	0	0	17	0	1	35
Part-time adjunct or contingent faculty	15	1	0	3	8	2	2	31
Full-time staff with teaching responsibility	0	2	0	0	3	2	0	7
Other	0	1	0	1	8	0	1	11
Total	47	6	0	4	82	5	10	154

**Primary field of graduate training.** Table 2 further clarifies the backgrounds and training of our survey respondents by reporting on their fields of graduate training, which at first glance appear diverse and include non-writing related fields (19 write-in responses). However, we find that around two-thirds of our respondents do bring training in a writing-related field to their work (i.e., creative-writing, composition and rhetoric, technical and professional communication). This finding is overall good news, although it is highly variable how relevant (from highly relevant to not at all relevant) training in composition and rhetoric and creative writing are to teaching the technical and professional communication service course. We note, also, that a higher number of our respondents come from an English or literature background than from a technical and professional communication background. This finding is both not entirely surprising and also a potential cause for concern.

**Table 2. Primary field of graduate training**

	Creative Writing	Composition/ Rhetoric	Cultural or American Studies	Digital Media and Design	Eng Lit.	TPC	Write- in
Graduate Instructor/ Teaching Assistant	1	8	0	0	0	2	0
Tenure-Track	4	25	0	1	11	12	6
Full-time non-tenure track	0	13	1	0	11	7	3
Part-time adjunct or contingent faculty	1	6	1	0	11	3	9
Full-time staff with teaching responsibility	2	1	1	0	2	1	0
Other	1	5	0	0	1	3	1
<b>Total</b> (n = 154)	<b>9</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>19</b>

**Relevant industry or other non-academic experience.** Table 3 reports on the extent to which survey respondents brought industry experience to their teaching. On what is a definite positive note, almost two-thirds of our respondents brought some level of industry experience to their work. However, because we left for interpretation what we meant by the term “industry experience,” respondents were asked to describe their experience in a write-in box. Their answers to this question revealed that our respondents counted a wide range of professional experiences as “industry” experience: working as a professional in industries such as banking, non-profits, construction, information technology, human resources; working as an executive secretary; being employed as a technical writer or technical editor or doing this work as an independent contractor; careers in journalism, publishing and other media industries. We note, further, that among those respondents who teach the technical and professional communication course off the tenure-track, industry-experience is more likely.

**Table 3. Relevant industry or other non-academic experience**

	Yes	No	I Don't Know
Graduate Instructor/Teaching Assistant	7	3	1
Tenure-Track	33	24	2
Full-time non-tenure track	23	9	3
Part-time adjunct or contingent faculty	22	7	2
Full-time staff with teaching responsibility	5	2	0
Other	9	0	2
<b>Total (n = 154)</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>10</b>

**Technical and professional writing as scholarly area of interest.** At first glance, Table 4 seems to suggest that roughly three-quarters of those who teach the service course consider technical and professional communication as an area of scholarly interest. This is good news. However, we want to clarify this finding by pointing out that, as with the term “industry experience,” we did not define the term for our respondents. Scholarly interest could therefore mean reading or doing research in a wide variety of areas. A surprising finding is that a higher percentage of faculty off the tenure-track



report being engaged in technical and professional communication as an area of research than those on the tenure-track.

**Table 4. Professional/technical writing as scholarly area of interest**

	Yes	No
Graduate Instructor/ Teaching Assistant	10	1
Tenure-Track	41	18
Full-time non-tenure track	26	9
Part-time adjunct or contingent faculty	22	9
Full-time staff with teaching responsibility	4	3
Other	8	3
Total (n = 154)	111	43

**Years of experience teaching the technical and professional communication course.** Table 5 reports the years of experience that our respondents bring to the teaching of the technical and professional communication course. The good news here is that the relatively robust number of respondents in each category above suggests that the technical and professional communication service course is taught during all different periods of a career: the data do not suggest that this course is taught primarily by new faculty. One exception to this trend is the relatively high percentage of adjunct faculty with 1–5 years of experience. This exception is likely attributable to the high turnover of adjunct faculty and the lower level of incentive for adjunct faculty to remain in these positions over the long term.

**Table 5. Years of experience teaching the TPC course**

	0	1–5	6–10	10+
Graduate Instructor/Teaching Assistant	1	10	0	0
Tenure-Track	0	20	14	25
Full-time non-tenure track	2	11	10	12
Part-time adjunct or contingent faculty	3	19	3	6
Full-time staff with teaching responsibility	0	0	2	5
Other	1	1	0	9
Total (n = 154)	7	61	29	57

Survey Data on Institutional Situation

**Department, program or college in which service course is offered.** Table 6 reports on where technical and professional communication service courses are housed at the institutions of survey respondents. Among our respondents, two-thirds of technical and professional communication courses are housed within departments of English. If departments of writing or rhetoric are factored into this number, we can say that over three-quarters of respondents’ technical and professional communication courses are housed within either an English or writing department. Because there were a sizeable number of write-in responses (20) to this question, we looked more closely at this data and found that around half of write-ins indicated that technical and professional communication courses at their institution are housed within a program of general education or liberal studies. This fact raises interesting questions about the pros and cons of the service course as an aspect of general education. Overall, this data further underscores how the technical and professional communication course continues to be largely “owned” by the humanities and liberal arts.

**Table 6. Department, program or college TPC service course is offered**

	English Dept.	Writing Program or Dept.	Comm Dept. or College	Business Dept.	Engi- neering Dept.	Write-In
Graduate In- structor/Teach- ing Assistant	8	2	0	0	0	1
Tenure-Track	40	6	2	2	2	7
Full time non- tenure track	26	5	2	0	0	2
Part time adjunct or con- tingent faculty	16	6	1	1	0	7
Full time staff with teaching responsibility	7	0	0	0	0	0
Other	4	3	0	1	0	3
Total (n = 154)	101	22	5	4	2	20

**Types of students who take the service course at your institution.** In Table 7, we see that students who enroll in technical and professional communication courses at the institutions of survey respondents come from a wide swath of majors and that, perhaps not surprisingly, the largest numbers overall come from business and engineering programs. We do note that, in combination, students from the categories of English or rhetoric minors and majors have numbers that are roughly equal to the numbers who come from either business or engineering. For English or rhetoric students, the technical and professional communication class is not taken as a service course but as part of a curriculum in English or writing. Due to their numbers, we can conclude that students from English, writing, and/or rhetoric departments are significant stakeholders in the technical and professional communication course.

**Table 7. Types of students who take the TPC service course at your institution**

	Bus & Mgt	Eng & CS	Sci- ence & Pre- Med	Liberal Arts	Social Sci- ences	Comm	Fine Arts	Eng- lish or Rhetor- ic Mi- nors	English or Rhetor- ic Majors	Other
Graduate Instructor/ Teaching Assistant	6	7	2	1	2	1	0	2	1	1
Tenure-Track	17	24	13	5	11	8	3	8	11	26
Full-time non-tenure track	16	18	13	10	10	10	3	8	12	12
Part-time adjunct or contingent faculty	18	20	10	8	8	9	7	8	8	7
Full-time staff with teaching responsibility	2	2	4	0	1	1	0	1	1	4
Other	5	3	2	0	1	0	0	1	1	5
Total	64	74	44	24	33	29	13	28	34	55

**Type of faculty member who teaches THE MOST sections of the service course at your institution.** Table 8 shows which types of faculty members are most likely to teach the technical and professional communication service course at our respondents’ institutions. We note the roughly equal distribution among tenure-track, non-tenure-track, and contingent faculty, a fact that makes sense in light of the institutional diversity of our respondent pool. We also, however, note that about two-thirds of our respondents report that most sections of the technical and professional communication service course at their institution are taught by faculty off the tenure track (i.e. FT-NTT, Adjunct, Pro. Staff).

**Table 8. Type of faculty member who teaches THE MOST sections of the TPC service course at your institution**

	GTA	Tenure Track	FT-NTT	Ad- junct	Pro. Staff w/Teaching	Don't Know	Other
Graduate Instructor/ Teaching Assistant	5	0	3	1	0	2	0
Tenure-Track	3	37	7	8	0	4	0
Full-time non-tenure track	1	3	26	4	0	1	0
Part-time adjunct or contingent faculty	0	3	2	25	0	1	0
Full-time staff with teaching responsibility	0	1	1	2	3	0	0
Other	0	4	2	3	1	0	1
<b>Total (n = 154)</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>1</b>

**Existence of standardized course outcomes for the service course at your institution.** Table 9 reports two pieces of information that speak to the level of standardization of the technical and professional communication course at respondents' institutions. First, it provides information on whether or not respondents work in a context in which a standardized set of outcomes is provided. Second, it shows, for those who do work in such a context, whether or not an assessment procedure is in place. Here we find that over two-thirds of our respondents work under a set of established outcomes and that just over half of these work in a context in which outcomes are assessed. We are encouraged by the data on established outcomes and not entirely surprised by the fact that fewer of our respondents' institutions assess their outcomes than have them in the first place.

**Table 9. Existence of standardized course outcomes for the TPC service course at your institution**

	<b>Out-comes</b>	<b>Out-comes</b>	<b>Out-comes</b>	<b>Assess-ment</b>	<b>Assess-ment</b>	<b>Assess-ment</b>
	Yes	No	Don't Know	Yes	No	Don't Know
Graduate Instructor/ Teaching Assistant	9	2	0	5	2	2
Tenure-Track	43	13	3	20	21	2
Full-time non-tenure track	29	4	2	18	7	4
Part-time adjunct or contingent faculty	26	5	0	17	3	6
Full-time staff with teaching responsibility	4	3	0	4	0	0
Other	9	2	0	6	1	2
<b>Total (n = 154/120)</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>16</b>

**Common syllabus and textbook.** Table 10 also reveals the level of standardization of the technical and professional communication service course, as well as the level of autonomy that instructors have over their syllabus and their choice of textbook. With regard to the question about a common syllabus, we find that just under three-quarters of our respondents are not obligated to follow a common syllabus. With regard to required textbooks, we find that among those who use a textbook to teach the course (142 out of 154 respondents), nearly two-thirds (taking into account write-ins) had autonomy over their textbook choice. We feel that these data-points, when placed side-by-side, suggest that our respondents are able to exert quite a significant degree of control over their teaching of the technical and professional communication service course.

**Table 10. Common syllabus and textbook**

	Common Syllabus?			Required Textbook?		
	Yes	No	I Don't Know	Required	I Chose It	Write-In
Graduate Instructor/ Teaching Assistant	2	9	0	5	4	2
Tenure-Track	14	44	1	7	41	8
Full-time non-tenure track	10	25	0	6	21	7
Part-time adjunct or contingent faculty	9	20	2	9	12	5
Full-time staff with teach- ing responsibility	3	4	0	3	2	0
Other	6	5	0	2	8	0
<b>Total (n = 154/142)</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>107</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>22</b>

**Instructor access to professional development.** Table 11 reports respondents' answers to a question asking about professional development. It shows that a little over half do have access to such opportunities but also that slightly over ten percent do not know whether professional development is available to them. If we combine the category of "I Don't Know" with the category of "No," we find that nearly half of our respondents work in contexts where professional development is either not available or is unknown to them.

**Table 11. Instructor access to professional development**

	Yes	No	I Don't Know
Graduate Instructor/Teaching Assistant	7	0	4
Tenure-Track	33	20	6
Full-time non-tenure track	20	12	3
Part-time adjunct or contingent faculty	11	16	4
Full-time staff with teaching responsibility	4	2	1
Other	9	1	1
<b>Total (n = 154)</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>19</b>

**Part II: Case Studies That Present Challenges for Stakeholders Who Are Trying to Think About How to Improve Conditions for the Course**

In this part of the article we present four case studies that we chose because they present unique challenges for stakeholders thinking about improving conditions for the course. We assume each case study speaks only for itself—certainly, none of the cases represent what might be considered fully typical or average cases based on the data in Part I. The first case study, Mandy, falls within trends in terms of her status (FT-NTT) and training (MA-Literature). She teaches, however, at an institutional type (trade school) that presents unique situations for Mandy as she works to improve the technical and professional communication service course; for example, she counts former K-12 teachers among her, and the technical and professional communication course is a part of the general education program. The second case study, Ilsa, presents a situation that falls outside of several of the trends of Part I as well. Ilsa has a high-degree of training (PhD), yet she has a position (FT-NTT) as the chair of a very small Communications department. Institutionally, she teaches outside the mainstream at a tribal college, which presents unique challenges in terms of geographical, cultural and professional isolation. The case study of George is not unusual in that he has a PhD in Literature, a FT-NTT position and teaches at a doctoral-granting institution. However, against a trend, George does not consider technical and professional communication an area of scholarly interest. He also teaches in a program with a high degree of standardization that he counts as both a blessing and a curse. Finally, Julia’s case reflects trends in terms of her level of training (PhD in technical and professional communication) and rank (tenure-track) at a 4-year institution. However Julia faces challenges in estab-

lishing her authority with students and the department in terms of her ability to innovate her technical and professional communication service course pedagogy due, in part, to pre-tenure review practices and gender dynamics in the classroom. At the beginning of each case study is a data box that reports on the same survey questions reported in the first half of the article.

**Mandy: Teaching the Technical and Professional Communication Service Course at High volume at a Trade School**

<b>Respondent Data</b>	
Institutional/Instructional status	Full-time, non-tenure track
Highest degree earned	MA
Field of graduate training	Literature, English or Comparative Lit.
Industry Experience	2 years in engineering; 14 years marketing and public relations from entry to executive level experience (12 years in manufacturing settings).
Area of scholarly interest	Professional/technical writing
Number of years teaching TPC course	1–5
Institutional Situation	
Institutional type	Associate College (trade school)
In what department/program/college is it offered?	General Education
# of sections offered per year	11–50
Who takes the course?	It's required to graduate
Who primarily teaches the TPC course at the institution?	Full-time, non-tenure track
Are there standardized TPC course outcomes?	Yes
Is there a common syllabus?	No
Is there a required textbook?	Yes
Assessment?	Yes
Is there instructor professional development?	Yes



**What is the story about Mandy?** The main story about Mandy is how she navigates the challenges inherent to a trade-school curriculum and the expectations that students bring to a trade-college education. As she explained, most students are of the attitude: “I really didn’t expect to have to take English again; I just want to learn my trade.” Mandy understands that students are very focused on learning the skills and knowledge of their trade, but she also wants them to understand, “how to use their rhetoric purposefully, in the application of their jobs.” She articulated the problem this way: “In the student’s mind, they want to run a conduit or they want to put together truss structures or they want to install HVAC. And they don’t understand that they’re still going to be required to communicate with their customers.” In addition, Mandy encounters the challenge of developing relevant and applicable examples for all trades in a general education writing course. Mandy works within the constraints of a technical college to overcome these challenges.

**Who is Mandy?** Mandy has an MA in literature from a state university in the upper Midwest. She has come to teaching the technical and professional communication course fairly recently (in the last 5 years) after a long career in industry, including two years in engineering and fourteen years in marketing and public relations from the entry- to executive-levels. Overall, she has twelve years of experience in manufacturing settings. Mandy feels that her experience in industry helps her to create bridges for the students between the textbook, classroom assignments, and what their experiences in industry will be.

**What is Mandy’s institutional situation?** Mandy teaches 100–150 students a semester across five blocks of a writing class that caps at 32 students. The required writing course for all students is part of the general education program at the technical college. Recently the course name was changed from Technical Writing to Workplace Communications because the course, “really doesn’t address the standards for technical writing that are acknowledged across other curriculums at other institutions.” The technical and professional communication service course is taken by students from across all of the trade programs. The level of standardization (required textbook and outcomes) of the course is quite high in order satisfy accreditation requirements, although instructors develop their own syllabi and vary in their approach to teaching the required assignments. Mandy does have

access to professional development and is “pushed” to participate in it by a dean of instructional design who has developed brackets of achievement to motivate participation.

The background of the faculty in the general education program varies widely. While several instructors, like Mandy, have backgrounds in the liberal arts and training in teaching in higher education, many instructors have come to teaching at the trade school from K-12 education. As Mandy pointed out, these instructors have a different philosophy towards teaching and different expectations for standardization and the level of rigor of the courses. While instructors from a K-12 background see the standards at the technical college as higher than those in a high school, instructors with Mandy’s background in higher education see the standards as a step down. In addition, Mandy explained, K-12 teachers expect less autonomy over the curriculum and less instructional license to “to approach lessons the way you feel it’s best to approach them.” In addition, some instructors, such as herself, have industry experiences, while others do not. Mandy sees a “pretty sharp line of delineation” between the teaching practices of instructors with industry experience who can bring that experiential knowledge into the classroom, and those who do not have it and therefore have to draw primarily on the textbook.

The variation in faculty backgrounds has resulted in some conflict in the department when discussion has been opened up about the standardized assignments in the course and how to ensure that they are relevant to the contemporary workplace. As Mandy put it, “when I came into this position a couple of years ago, one of the instructors was using an assignment for instructions—Lego instructions, which my daughter did in fifth grade.” The debate over this instructions assignment opened up the conversation about, “how the kinds of lessons we teach are adapted from 30 years ago to how we’re adjusting our approaches to instruction today.” According to Mandy, they have moved away from that assignment and have gone out to industry to ask, “what are you doing, how are you developing these things.” Mandy sees building these bridges with industry as key to making the course relevant for students. The trade school actually has a lot of support from area industry, so Mandy can expect a positive reception when she approaches a company with questions or sends students to a company for samples of writing. In her quest to improve the technical and professional communication service course at the trade school,

Mandy seems to have the support of the administration and local industry; however, the variations in instructor experience and training continue to present a challenge.

**How does Mandy respond curricularly?** In her own teaching, Mandy continues to shape her lessons and approach to the technical and professional communication service course around her desire to connect students with the real writing situations of their trade and her worry about the transfer of knowledge from her classroom to students' future careers in a trade: "I'm not sure I feel totally confident about knowledge transfer when they go to apply it to the job. There still seems to be a hesitation with the students... Personally, even as an instructor, regardless of how fantastic my lesson is [laughter], there may be some that get it, but it seems like there's a larger group that don't." For example, Mandy sends her students out to industry to gather sample types of writing that they can discuss in class: "When they bring those back to class, we can talk about them and say even if we don't actually go through the process of filling those out, we can talk about what they are, how they work, things like that, and what they need to know and communicate on those documents."

One of the newer assignments that has been added to the course is a technical description or technical specification. This assignment was requested by one of the trade programs at the college because of information from the industry advisory board that this was an important type of writing for students. Mandy talked about how this is a challenging assignment to teach because students get lost in the details of the procedure they are describing. Mandy's primary concern is that they maintain a focus on transfer, so she asks students: "How are you going to transfer that knowledge to the workplace? How are you going to acquire this skill and master it as you go into the workplace?"

## **Ilsa: Teaching the Technical and Professional Communication Course in Geographical, Cultural and Professional Isolation**

<b>Respondent Data</b>	
Institutional/Instructional status	Full-time, non-tenure track
Highest degree earned	PhD
Field of graduate training	Composition & Rhetoric
Industry Experience	Book publishing industry; writing court expert opinions; scholarly editing work
Area of scholarly interest	Composition & Rhetoric
Number of years teaching TPC course	6-10
Institutional Situation	
Institutional type	Tribal College (2-year degrees)
In what department/program/college is it offered?	Communications Department
# of sections offered per year	1-10
Who takes the course?	Sophomore level students; liberal arts and social science students, some business students; health and fitness and computer science
Who primarily teaches the TPC course at the institution?	FT-NTT
Are there standardized TPC course outcomes?	Yes
Is there a common syllabus?	Yes
Is there a required textbook?	Yes
Assessment?	Yes
Is there instructor professional development?	No

**What is the story about Ilsa?** Ilsa speaks for a population of writing instructors at tribal colleges that has little voice in the mainstream forums of writing studies.

Due to a severe lack of resources, institutional isolation that is the outcome of the historical development of tribal colleges, cultural isolation from mainstream business culture, and a general sense that the larger world of higher education does not care, the challenges that are faced by service course writing instructors at tribal colleges and the wisdom learned from working with these challenges go largely unheard in writing studies scholarship. This case study about Ilsa is valuable for the insight that it offers into the experience of a writing instructor at a tribal college. And there is a lot to learn. As Ilsa said, in the half-joking tone of all profound truths: "... native people often joke that 'oh, now, finally, white people learned this. We have known this all along,' and that's true...[native people] have an amazing culture of teaching and learning, for example."

**Who is Ilsa?** Ilsa has over 30-years' experience teaching, including lengthy experience with teaching English as a foreign language and as a second language. She has over six-years' experience teaching the technical and professional communication service course, as well as industry experience in book publishing and other professional writing. After earning a degree from a university in eastern Europe, Ilsa earned a PhD in Composition & Rhetoric at the University of Arizona, and, after several teaching jobs at two- and four-year institutions, she started teaching at a tribal college. Since 2007 she has taught full-time at the tribal college, where she decided to stay because the teaching environment was so "fascinating and challenging." Despite little support for her research activity, Ilsa is an active scholar, including a chapter in an edited collection about college-level reading that was written from research supported by an American Indian College Fund grant. While there has been interest in her scholarly work, interest in and attendance at conferences for tribal college faculty tends to be very limited. While it is a "wonderful" experience to share scholarship and teaching practices with 6 people, these small conferences remain isolated from what is happening at CCCC, which "is something completely different happening." This isolation from mainstream scholarship for tribal college faculty is something that Ilsa would like to see change.

**What is Ilsa's institutional situation?** Ilsa has recently been promoted to the chair of the Communications Department at a tribal college in the upper Midwest. Because the rank of tenure-track is not available at tribal colleges, she is a full-time, non-tenure track faculty in a department of four full-time (including her) and 2 part-time faculty. Faculty face challenges that include very long commutes that make bringing instructors together for meetings impossible, and heavy teaching loads of up to eight sections. In addition, there are no course releases available for extra responsibilities and research shows that, according to Ilsa, salaries at tribal colleges are 10% to 15% below the average of similar faculty of other two-year colleges. For the technical and professional communication service course in particular, the curriculum is standardized via a required textbook (*Successful Writing at Work* by Philip C. Kolin) that Ilsa said she had no control over choosing.

**How does Ilsa respond curricularly?** The institutional situation strongly shapes how Ilsa approaches the technical and professional communication service course. One of her biggest challenges, for example, is using a standard textbook. While the required textbook (Kolin) is considered a standard text for technical and professional communication courses across higher education, native students have a hard time identifying with business examples and writing conventions shaped by mainstream white culture: "I was teaching kids who grew up on a reservation, and, you know, in this book there are assignments that ask them to pretend like they are the CEO of Exxon, or something. . . ." Native students are both geographically and culturally isolated from mainstream business culture, and they do not grow up with the assumption that they will join it someday—in fact, they often express skepticism about its value. As a result, Ilsa uses the textbook as a reference for document conventions, but she looks to the local community for writing projects that will engage and empower students.

Community writing projects in which students engage include designing a flier to make the class registration process clearer to students at the college, researching a report on how to set up an animal shelter in the community, or preparing a PowerPoint presentation on a proposal to improve the programming at the Boys & Girls Club. Many of these projects go beyond classroom work and contribute to material change in the community. For example, Ilsa's students did the

research necessary to implement a bus service to campus so that students do not have to rely on their cars to get to campus during the long, cold winters. To the fullest extent possible, Ilsa endeavors to bring in real audiences for the students' projects, including community elders and the administration of the college. In some instances, such as the flier about registration, the projects are adopted by the stakeholders and actually put into use.

One of the challenges that Ilsa worries about for students is their access to technology and how a certain level of technological literacy has become a norm across higher education. One of the limitations of incorporating multimedia into the curriculum is the lack of professional development for instructors: "I would need some money to train [instructors] how to teach students to put together a video project. [Students] have cell phones...they are very creative with art and design and that would be so nice, but I am not that good...I can't handle [becoming proficient in more technologies] without help." For example, Ilsa pays for her own Prezi subscription, but she cannot expect students to buy one. She often finds herself showing students technologies without being able to teach them how to work with it.

One of the goals that Ilsa has before she retires is to set up a Communications major. She has started negotiations, but she has to move slowly in order to gain support and to show that she does not just want to do "fancy English teaching." On the contrary, Ilsa wants to argue that "no matter what other major they choose, if they are good readers and writers, their chances of getting jobs and moving on are better." Despite Ilsa's commitment to the work that she does, she realizes that, "you can't turn around and change the world." The challenges faced by instructors at tribal colleges have material consequences for the education of native students, and this is a fact that Ilsa would like the broader writing studies community to know.

## George: “Contingent Faculty, With All That That Means”

<b>Respondent Data</b>	
Institutional/Instructional status	Instructor, Full-Time Non-Tenure Track (Visiting Assistant Professor)
Highest degree earned	PhD
Field of graduate training	Literature, English or Comparative Literature
Industry Experience	No
Area of scholarly interest	No
Number of years teaching TPC course	1–5
<b>Institutional Situation</b>	
Institutional type	Doctorate Granting Institutions
In what department/program/college is it offered?	English Department
# of sections offered per year	11–50
Who takes the course?	Junior, Senior, Transfer, International; Engineering and CS and Science & pre-medical
Who primarily teaches the TPC course at the institution?	Full-time, non-tenure track.
Are there standardized TPC course outcomes?	Yes
Is there a common syllabus?	Yes
Is there a required textbook?	Yes
Assessment?	I don't know
Is there instructor professional development?	Yes

**What is the story about George?** George’s story exists at a nexus at which several important and well-documented stories about labor practices in higher education collide. First, there is the story of individuals who pursue advanced graduate study in areas of English Studies for which there is limited and/or declining curricular demand. Second, there is the story of graduate programs in English Studies that make available specialized training in subject areas for which full-time, tenure-track positions are increasingly difficult to secure.



Third, there is the story of institutions that create considerable demand for writing instruction by initiating writing requirements for large cohorts of students—demand that cannot be met by existing English and/or writing faculty. These stories coalesce in the case of George, a Visiting Assistant Professor (VAP) on a three-year contract at a large Midwestern university. George's case speaks to a number of challenges within the fields of technical communication, English, and writing studies, but especially to the difficulty of providing instruction in technical and professional communication to large groups of students when one's labor force is entirely contingent and frequently lacking in explicit training in subject-area knowledge.

**Who is George?** Like many who teach in the technical writing program in which he works, George never intended to teach technical and professional communication courses, has no graduate training that prepared him to do so, has no industry experience on which to draw, and does not identify technical communication or even composition as his primary research areas. While George has taught a range of introductory literature and writing courses, his graduate training is in the area of medieval studies. Despite his teaching load, George continues to pursue research in his field but writes and researches in other areas as well. Recently he published a short article in a well-respected composition journal that examines his marginalized status as a non-tenure track faculty member. Occasionally, George has attended conferences in the field of composition. In sum, George is a teacher and scholar trying to maintain two professional identities at once—the identity he developed in his chosen field (i.e., medieval studies) and the one he currently occupies in his adopted one (composition and technical writing).

**What is George's institutional situation?** The institutional situation surrounding the technical and professional communication service course at George's university plays a significant role in shaping the curriculum that he and his colleagues must implement. According to George, the technical writing course he teaches was created to satisfy accreditation requirements of the university's engineering college (students from other majors take the course, but the majority who enroll come from engineering). Thus, the exigence for the course originates neither within George's department nor within George's own scholarly interests but, instead, within an entity external to both. Given this,

the curriculum is standardized to a considerable degree. During our interview, George shared the almost 50-page course packet that both enumerates course policies and dictates curricular decisions. As this document makes clear, all sections of the course utilize the same textbook, work towards the same outcomes, and include the same assignments. The papers students produce are of the standard communications-genres type, including resumes and cover letters, technical instructions, proposals, memos, and reports. In sum, due to the institutional situation surrounding the technical and professional communication course at George's university, there is little opportunity for instructors to innovate or experiment with the curriculum.

**How does George respond curricularly?** Perhaps not surprisingly, George reported that he feels "micro-managed" in his current position, treated "as if [he] were a graduate student rather than having completed [his] degree and taught for several years." Not long after he was hired, George attempted to experiment with the curriculum a bit by "having students look at outside documents and critique them [as a way of] building familiarity with genre conventions." He was, he explained, "rebuked" and asked to stick to the program. Now he tows the line, adhering almost entirely to the program curriculum.

Given George's teaching load, the highly-prescribed curriculum he is charged with delivering is, he admitted, in some ways a relief: "The work is fairly easy to do, which is helpful while teaching three or four sections." Still, George feels conflicted, professionally, teaching a course that, as he concedes "really kind of teaches itself." And yet George strives to do his best by his students, making small efforts where and when possible to improve the class. "If teaching [the technical and professional communication service course] is going to be the job I do, I want to know enough about it to be able to do it well," he explained. Still, George said he has no plans to make this work into a formal area of research. For now, he will continue to teach writing as he explores post-doctoral opportunities in his primary field, medieval studies.

## Julia: Seeking Greater Authority to Innovate

<b>Respondent Data</b>	
Institutional/Instructional status	Tenure-Track
Highest degree earned	PhD
Field of graduate training	Technical/Professional Communication
Industry Experience	Yes
Area of scholarly interest	Yes
Number of years teaching TPC course	10+
<b>Institutional Situation</b>	
Institutional type	Masters-granting College or University
In what department/program/college is it offered?	English
# of sections offered per year	1–10
Who takes the course?	Sophomore, junior, senior, transfer, international students; Business, engineering, science and pre-med, social sciences, liberal arts, communications, English, Writing/Rhetoric
Who primarily teaches the TPC course at the institution?	Tenure-Track Faculty
Are there standardized TPC course outcomes?	Yes
Is there a common syllabus?	No
Is there a required textbook?	No
Assessment?	Yes
Is there instructor professional development?	Yes

**What is the story about Julia?** Julia's experience speaks to the sometimes surprising challenges that instructors face in teaching the technical and professional communication service course, even when they are working in close to ideal circumstances. As a new assistant professor at a small liberal arts college where teaching is given top priority, Julia has considerable autonomy in devising her curriculum. Given her

graduate training in the fields of writing studies and technical and professional communication, she has designed an innovative course that attends closely to teaching students to understand and appreciate the role of rhetoric and context in all composing situations. This transfer-oriented curriculum is in danger, though, because of the challenges it presents to Julia's students, some of whom bring conservative expectations to the class. Having recently received negative feedback on course evaluations, Julia has begun to reconsider her pedagogical innovations—an ironic turn of events given her background and the wide leeway she has been granted by her department to design a course that aligns with her knowledge and goals.

**Who is Julia?** Julia is ideally suited to the teaching of technical and professional communication. Her graduate training at a midwestern university helped her to craft a research agenda which investigates the ways in which individuals enmeshed within networks of activity interact with professional documents and texts. Additionally, while pursuing her doctorate, Julia served in an administrative capacity within both her university's first-year and professional writing programs. She has published in writing studies' major journals, including in venues that focus on professional writing and writing for digitally-mediated environments. Teaching the technical and professional communication service course is not something Julia does to pay the bills. It is among her primary interests and pleasures. "I've always enjoyed teaching this course," Julia explained. "I teach it in a way that I think is fun for the students and provides great context for the differences between writing at school and writing at work."

**What is Julia's institutional situation?** The technical and professional communication course that Julia teaches is taken by a diverse range of students, including those in the professional writing track and those who enroll in order to satisfy the college's advanced writing requirement. Because the class is housed within English and, for all intents and purposes, Julia "owns" it, she has wide latitude in the course design. She invents and revises course outcomes, chooses teaching materials, and devises assignments as she sees fit. Because only a few sections of the course are offered each year, there is no course coordinator or programmatic assessment procedure. First and foremost, the class is

understood to make an important curricular contribution to the department's ambitious writing major. Secondly, it allows the department to contribute to the college's university-wide advanced writing requirement.

**How does Julia respond curricularly?** A glance at Julia's course syllabus suggests the non-traditional approach she takes to the class: the textbooks she has selected are not of the standard, genre-driven type, and instruction is not organized around explicit guidance in composing workplace genres. Instead, the class is built on the notion that "Each organization in the 'real world' is different and will require different kinds of writing." As such, the focus of the course, Julia explains, is "NOT to teach the skills you need to write for a professional organization, but to teach how to learn the skills you need once faced with a professional writing situation." Julia chooses to focus on raising awareness about the significance of rhetorical situation to professional composing. "I have students do a lot of thinking about audience and context," she explained. "I want them to be aware of what they already know about writing and what more they may need to know."

The challenge Julia faces with this context-sensitive approach to technical and professional communication course instruction is that it is difficult to find curricular materials that are suitable for her audience (i.e. undergraduate students). An admirer of the Writing-About-Writing (WAW) approach to teaching first-year composition, Julia asks students in her classes to read scholarly articles from the fields of writing studies and technical communication, but the students, and particularly the non-writing majors, have tended to respond negatively, sometimes writing comments on Julia's teaching evaluations that threaten her ability to secure tenure and promotion. "They don't like the reading in the course very much," she said. "I wish there were things [for them to read] that were geared more towards undergraduates."

The problem of locating developmentally appropriate curricular materials is, Julia pointed out, compounded by her status as a young, female instructor. These two issues come together to create what Julia has come to feel is an authority problem—because she is young and because she is teaching outside of the traditional box of a well-known textbook, students sometimes question her credibility. To address this dilemma, Julia plans to experiment with adopting a more traditional technical and professional communication textbook to supplement the

materials and approach she is already using. "I still want to use the readings [from the field], but I want to put them with a textbook so I can say, 'Okay, this is how you write a report.' I just feel like I need somebody else to be supporting what I say in class." As Julia continues to rethink the design of her course, she hopes to strike a better balance between the more traditional genre-based approach to the teaching of technical and professional communication and her more rhetorical, transfer-oriented approach. In this way, the institutional situation in which Julia finds herself as a young, female, assistant professor working in a small, pedagogically-oriented college plays a not insignificant role in shaping the evolving curriculum that Julia teaches.

### **Conclusion**

We opened this article by asking who teaches the technical and professional communication service course and in what institutional situations. We have reported two different kinds of answers to this question: 1. trends across instructor experience and institutional context in the aggregated data of the survey and, 2. localized experiences in the case studies. Given the data presented above, we argue that discussion of the status of the technical and professional communication service course must account for both types of answers in order to remain relevant to the broadest group of stakeholders. This is easier said than done, however.

On the one hand, the survey data reveals at times strong trends in instructor training and experience and institutional situation, suggesting that discussion of the status of the technical and professional communication service course can rely on so-called "average" (in the rhetorical, not the mathematical sense) experiences. On the other hand, the case studies present an alternative message, one of great diversity and localization of experience.

Given that it is impossible to know or predict whether individual instructors' experiences will reflect any or all of the general trends, it will be challenging to bring instructors of service courses and technical and professional communication programs together to advocate for cohesion, shared missions, or shared outcomes. Having said this, we would like to press our readers to move outward from their own experiences to ask what we have in common, as teachers of the technical and professional communication service course within and across diverse institutions of higher education.

The differences in the institutional situations shaping the work of those who teach this course are, as we have seen, considerable. At the same time, we have seen areas of overlap and opportunities for dialogue across institutional situations. It is our hope that this article will assist readers in reconsidering not just the circumstances surrounding their own teaching of the service course but, also, the circumstances shaping the teaching of the technical and professional communication, in general.

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Appendix A

Table 1A. Percentage of Survey Respondents by Carnegie Classification Institution

Carnegie Classification Category	Proportional Representation by Student FTE Enrollment (numbers available in 2014)*	Percentage of Survey Respondents (n = 154; complete surveys only)
Associates Colleges (predominantly 2-year institutions)	37%	38% (n = 59)
Baccalaureate Colleges (largely liberal arts colleges)	7%	4% (n = 6)
Masters Colleges and Universities	23%	19% (n = 30)
Doctorate-Granting Institutions	28%	37% (n = 57)
Special Focus & Faith Institutions (includes stand-alone law, business and medical schools)	7%	1% (n = 1)
Tribal Colleges	.1%	1% (n = 1)

\*Numbers rounded-up to nearest whole number. Total exceeds 100% because of rounding.



## Appendix B

**Table 1B. Percentage of Survey Respondents by Faculty Rank**

<b>Faculty Rank</b>	<b>AAUP reported percentage of all faculty for 2011</b>	<b>Percentage of Survey Respondents (n = 154; complete surveys only)</b>
Tenure Track	23.5%	38% (n = 59)
Full-Time, Non-Tenure Track	15.7%	23% (n = 35)
Part-Time Adjunct or Contingent Faculty	41.5%	20% (n = 31)
Graduate Instructor/Teaching Assistant	19.3%	7% (n = 11)
Other, including full-time staff with teaching responsibility	N/A	12% (n = 18)

## Author Information

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Mike Michaud is Associate Professor of English and chair of the campus Writing Board at Rhode Island College (Providence, RI). He teaches courses in rhetorical theory, digital and multimodal writing, first-year writing, and supervises an internship practicum. His work has appeared in *College Composition and Communication*, *Writing on the Edge*, *Writing and Pedagogy*, *Composition Studies*, and *Intermezzo*. Mike's current research focuses on Donald M. Murray and the writing programs at University of New Hampshire.

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